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Sample questions for two folktales, "Molly Whuppie" and "The Fisherman and His Wife," are posed. The questions are deliberately worded to evoke discussion, disagreement, and even argument. The purpose is to foster individual reaction and lively discussion. The questions are divided into categories only for convenience. Each story is considered as to characterization, plot, motivation, moral considerations, theme, setting, personal involvement, analogies, language, diction, style, point of view, and structure.

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1965 HARVARD-BOSTON SUMMER PROGRAM - LANGUAGE ARTS

TEAMS B and C

Sample Questions for Folktales

This section contains sample questio ns for two folktales: "Molly Whuppie" (Team B) and "The Fisherman and His Wife" (Team C). By reading through the questions, noticing the categories we have placed them in, and examining some of the question sequences, you should get a precise idea of the kinds of discussion we think should spring from the tales. We would like all the teachers to study both sets of questions. Because "Molly Whuppie" and "The Fisherman and His Wife" are quite different stories, together they illustrate how the story itself determines the amount and kind of emphasis each category merits. Furthermore, between them, these two stories provide sufficient questions and possibilities for types of questions to enable teachers to gain quite a clear idea of what each category can involve.

Please note that the questions are deliberately worded to evoke discussion, disagreement, even argument.* Part of our intention is to loosen up the classroom atmosphere, to encourage individual response to the stories. Such an atmosphere should be helped by relatively openended questions: "Why did...?" instead of "Did...?" We do not insist on these wordings as the only alternatives, however; we provide them primarily as food for discussion in the planning sessions.

As you will see, many of these questions fit under more than one category; many will lead to answers, further questions, and discussions in categories different from those of the original questions. This is as it should be. Perhaps we should make it clear that we do not recommend that you systematically explore one category after another. We are recommending instead that you pay attention to all of these categories when planning a lesson. Remember that these questions, which vary in value and importance, are samples only, and do not represent all the possible worthwhile questions in these stories, nor necessarily the best questions. With these as influence, the teacher's own plans and students should determine the ordering of the classroom discussion.

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MOLLY WHUPPIE

Characterization:

Who are the people involved in the story?

What facts does the story give about each of them? How do you learn this fact? That fact?

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* A very brief example of the kind of exchange we have in mind is supplied at the end of the "Molly Whuppie" questions.

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What is the giant's wife like? How do you know?
or
What would you expect a giant's wife to be like? Is this giant's wife like that?

Is the wife of the giant kindhearted or hardhearted? How do you know?
or
Why did the giant's wife take the children in?

What is Molly like? How do you know?
Specifically:
What does the storyteller tell you about Molly?
What do Molly's actions tell you about Molly?
What does her last escape from the giant show about her? (get several characteristics, e.g., quick thinking and clever, willing to let others suffer to save self, does not give up)
What other actions of hers in the story show the same qualities?
How does she feel about her sisters? How do you know?
What does the way other people treat her tell you about Molly?
What does what Molly says tell you about Molly?
What does what other people in the story say about her tell you about Molly?

What is the giant like? (read or have the children read selected portions from the de la Mare version, if you are not using it, to expand the picture of the giant)

Plot:

Why are Molly and her sisters in the forest?

How do they escape from the giant?

What tasks does the King send Molly on? And what rewards does he offer? 1.-,2.-,3.-.
or
Why does Molly go back to the giant's house? First time, second time, third time.

Why are the sisters included in the story?
or
Could you tell the same story without the sisters being in it? How?

How does Molly get caught?

How does she escape?

A specifically "plot" activity might be to assign parts (including a narrator) to children and have them retell the story in their own words. The rest of the class could raise hands or interrupt when something is left out or done wrong. Members of the rest of the class could tell the characters what they should say next.

Motivation: (leads to character or plot discussion)

Why did the giant put necklaces round the children's necks?

Why does Molly answer the giant's threat with a nonsense rhyme about Spain? (point out ahead of time that "Molly Whuppie" is a British folktale not set in Spain)

Why does the King want Molly to steal these three things of the giant's? (Does it spoil the story not to be able to answer this question?)

Moral Considerations:

What are some of the cruel or unfair things done in the story? Who did them? Why? (de la Mare has more evidence against the giant)

Could any of these bad acts be excused? Why?

Could any of these bad acts be understood because of special circumstances? Why? What were the circumstances?

What is different in Molly's world from ours that might explain why she acted as she did?

What is the code of right and wrong there?

Theme:

What problem confronts Molly and her sisters at the start of the story?

What further problems are added?

How does she overcome these problems?

What does she get by doing so?

Does she solve the basic first problem? What is the solution?

Therefore: What does the story seem to say about Molly?
About people like Molly? (Who are people like Molly?)
About people in general?

Setting:

Why do you suppose the giant did not follow Molly across the Bridge of One Hair?

A specifically "setting" activity would be a drawing or painting assignment such as: Molly crossing the bridge or the children lost in the forest.

Using the de la Mare version or excerpts from it: What was the house of the King like? What was kingly about his house?

Personal Involvement and Analogies:

How would you feel if you were left in the forest like Molly?

Would you have figured out why the giant put necklaces on the girls?

How old do you think Molly was? Why?

Would you have followed the King's requests? Why or why not?

Have you ever felt left on your own (like Molly was in the forest) with no one but yourself to look out for you?

Language, Diction and Style:

De la Mare - What is the storyteller telling you when he gives this description of the way the giant eats his supper: "but between bites he looked at the children"?

De la Mare - What does the giant mean when he says "So, so, my pretty chickabiddies! ...Now you're safe!" when he locks up three children?

De la Mare - The giant's wife calls the children "lasses" and their father gives them "bread and treacle." These are not all common American words; can you guess where these words are used commonly? What might Americans call the girls? What would an American father give his daughter instead of bread and treacle?

De la Mare - "Woe betide ye, Molly Whuppie, If ye e're come back again!" The first line means "You'll be sorry, Molly Whuppie." What does the second line mean? What does "ye" mean? Who might talk that way? When? If you were the giant, what would you say to threaten Molly?

Point of View:

Who is telling the story?

Whomdoes the storyteller seem to like or admire? How do you know?

Whom does he seem to dislike? Why do you think so?

How does he feel about the giant's wife? How do you know?

Why doesn't he tell us more about the King, the sisters, the princes?

Structure:

Why is it that only three of the characters are described very much or do very much in the story?

What would be added to the story if it were longer and told more about the sisters? What would being longer take away from the story?

When were you most worried about Molly? Why were you worried?

A Sample Classroom Discussion:

Q. Why did the giant's wife take the children in?
A Because she's kindhearted.

Q. What does kindhearted mean?
A. She likes to be nice to people, to help them.

Q. Did these children need help?
A. Yes, they were lost in the forest and hungry. That's why they went to her door and asked to be taken in.

Q. How did she help them?
A. By giving them food and a bed and by telling her husband to leave them alone.

Q. Does everybody agree she was kindhearted?
or
Could she have had any other reason for taking them in?
A. 1. She could have wanted to let her husband eat them.
2. But she told him to leave them alone.
1. Maybe she was just saying that to fool them into thinking she was nice.
2. Why should she do that?
1. Maybe she was sneaky.

Q. If that was her reason, do you still think she was kindhearted?

Etc., etc.

Finally, after some argument between children:
Q. OK, now look at the story again. Which reason do you think she had for taking in - to help them or to feed them to her husband? Look at the way she acts the rest of the time. Is she mean or nice? Give me an example. Is she clever, sneaky or kindhearted?

At the risk of seeming tedious, we should point out again that we seek to foster individual reaction and lively discussion. If the teachers can evoke lively, attentive response to the details of the story, the important job of comparing the story to other stories of its type should be much easier.

THE FISHERMAN AND HIS WIFE

Plot:

What does the incident of catching the flounder have to do with the rest of the story?

Although the story seems almost the same, incident after incident, what is happening to the wife's wishes as the story develops?

Would this story make a good movie? Why or why not?

Can you say in one or two sentences what happens in the story? (plot) Do you think people would remember the story if they were told your two sentences instead of the full story? What makes them remember the story? (structure, character, style)
or
How complicated is this story? What do we mean by a complicated story? A simple story?

Do you think the storyteller was most interested in what happens, the events themselves, or in what happens at the end? Why do you think so?

Is what happens at the end related in any way to the rest of the story? How?

Characterization:

What is the first thing the wife says to her husband when he returns from fishing?

What does this suggest about what sort of wife she is?

How would you say that line if you were an actress playing the part of the wife?

What reason does the wife give for wanting to be king?

What reasons do you think she has for wanting to be king? Why do you think so?

What does the storyteller tell you specifically about the wife?

What does the husband think of her? How do you know? Is he right? Why?

What opinion does the wife have of herself? How do you know?

What does the wife think of her husband? How do you know?

What does this show about her?

Is her opinion correct? Why or why not?

How does the husband feel about asking the flounder for favors? How do you know?

How do you know how he feels about asking the flounder to make his wife king?

What does the fisherman want in life? How do you know?

What is the flounder like? Does it matter? Why or why not?

Motivation: (related closely to character and plot)

Why does the fisherman go back to ask the fish for a cottage?

Why doesn't the fisherman do what he thinks is right?

Why do you suppose the flounder kept granting the wishes?

Why couldn't the wife sleep when she was Pope?

Moral Considerations:

Why do you suppose the flounder took away everythink at the end?

Did the wife deserve what she got?

Was the wife happy? When?

Theme:

Why didn't the flounder make the wife "like unto God"?

Why does the story keep repeating except for slight but important changes?

What type of person is the wife?

What happens to people who are never satisfied, according to this story?

What do you think the teller of this tale wants to tell you?
or
Is this story trying to teach a lesson? Why do you think so? What is the lesson?

Personal Involvement and Analogues:

What would you do if you caught a talking fish?

Have you ever wanted life to be easier and grander?

Have you ever found that when you got something you wanted, you then wanted something more? Give examples.

Have you ever wanted to be important or powerful?

If you had been the wife, would you have kept on asking? Where would you stop? Why?

Do you know anyone like the wife?

Do you know anyone like the husband?

If you had a wish, what would you wish for? Why?

Setting:

Describe the fisherman's home before it changes. What difference does it make to the story where and how the fisherman and his wife lived at the beginning of the story?

How is the sea described each time the man returns to ask another favor? What feelings does each new description give you?

What connection is there between the description of the sea and each following description of the home (e.g., just before the King's Castle)?

Why does the storyteller give the long description of the whole landscape (not just the sea) as husband goes out to ask that his wife be Pope?

Why do you think the land is being rocked by a raging storm when the man goes to ask that the wife be God?

How realistic do you think the description of the Emperor's Palace is? Explain your opinion.

Why does the storyteller exaggerate so in describing the Emperor's and the Pope's palaces? (style and purpose)

Paint a series of pictures in color of three different times the fisherman goes to the ocean.

Language:

What would be the difference if the wife said to her husband when he first returned: "Husband, have you caught anything today?" How would other kinds of wives ask the same question? Give examples.

How does the wife get her husband to return to ask the flounder for wishes: by begging him, by asking him, by ordering him, by hinting to him? Pick out the sentence that proves your choice in the first conversation they have.

What is the difference between a cottage and a hovel?

What is the difference between a king and an emperor:

What is the difference between an emperor and the Pope?

When the wife tells the husband to go ask to make her Pope, she ends by saying "Will you go at once?" How do you think she says it? What do you think she means? Look at the next line.

Purpose:

Why doesn't the author give these characters any names? (related to style and theme)

Why do you think the storyteller told this story?

Structure:

Why doesn't the storyteller give much more information about the flounder? Does it matter that we do not get to know the flounder at all compared to our knowledge of the man and wife?

Why does the storyteller end the story so suddenly? What more might be said?

Would saying more make the story better? Why or why not?

Children might be asked to write their own versions of the husband's return home his last time.

Sequencing of Questions

As you see from reading the stories and those questions, our arrangement of these questions does not suggest the order in which they should be asked. We have no intention of "programming" the lessons. Any detailed preliminary sequencing of questions would destroy the very atmosphere we are trying to foster. In a good discussion of a tale, the next question might spring from the last answer, or perhaps from an answer five minutes ago, or from an unexpected insight from the back of the room, or from the teacher's notes.

Rather than arrange the questions in some "ideal" order, we have placed the kinds of questions we think should be asked under categories, because we are convinced that teachers of literature should never give themselves exclusively, or even largely, to consideration of plot. When we first announced that conviction, we were asked by several people to say exactly what else we had in mind as suitable material for discussion. We replied that we were interested in character development, style, theme and so forth. We were urged to present our sample lessons, not in the form of generalizations about characterization, style, setting, etc., but in the form of specific questions that should lead teacher and students into discussion of those levels or focuses of attention we thought were important.

At first we thought of grouping the questions in sequences that would vaguely resemble the classroom order of question-and-answer. But recognizing that such grouping would be not only uselessly artificial but misleading, we decided that grouping the questions under [illegible]e categories of emphasis would be more profitable.

We do not want our placement of these questions in these categories to be deceiving. They are thus place (1) because sequencing seemed impossible, if we were to promote relatively spontaneous classroom discussion, and (2) because we wanted to show teachers exactly what we meant by other-than-plot-summary questions. The placement of questions in these categories does not mean that teachers should go through these questions, category after category. The order of the questions will depend upon the responses of the students (which are unpredictable), upon the nature of the particular story, and upon the intentions of the individual teacher.

Please note the last. The teacher's plans are the most important component of the process. Each teacher must decide, in planning the lesson, the appropriate points of emphasis. He may wish to emphasize characterization or theme or point of view in a particular story. He may wish to emphasize all three, or more. Since he is not programming a teaching machine, he will know that even the most perfect sequence of questions, prepared in advance, leading to a statement about characterization, for example, can easily change directions. He can come to that statement, nevertheless, by using the teaching techniques available to him. The basic decision of emphasis is his, the sub-decisions of routes towards the goals he chooses are arrived at ad lib, through the give-and-take of the classroom.